

Multitasking Under Fire

By Captain Daniel J. Lucitt

It is ironic that as the United States Army focuses on the modularity of its force, one unit strived for and succeeded in forming a legacy-type force. The effort was based on the needs of the current fight and the results could only be accomplished through flexibility. This common-sense determination was due to the foresight of the leaders of the 40th Engineer Battalion and the 2d Brigade Combat Team (BCT) of the 1st Armored Division, home-stationed in Baumholder, Germany. This article is not an argument for a return to the earlier structure of fighting force, but it serves as a good example of Army small-unit flexibility and versatility.

Assuming command, breaking apart task organization, retraining for a new mission under the parent battalion, and moving into a different operational environment were the jobs on the first quarter calendar of events for Charlie Company, 40th Engineer Battalion. The Army has come to

a point where that kind of flexibility is the norm. Four or five years ago, flexibility was a buzzword that fit cleverly into every canned set of talking points. Now, flexibility—coupled with determination—is at the heart of the Army culture. Whether it's a field artillery battery that retraines to serve in a military police capacity or the Soldiers of an engineer platoon who serve as civil affairs escorts, the Army has come to employ all forms of flexibility effectively.

In October 2008, Charlie Company was to conduct a change of command while deployed in Baghdad, Iraq. Normally this is a run-of-the-mill activity, even while deployed. However, it was the fifth company-level change of command for the BCT in as many months. The only obstacle to the obligatory change-of-command inventories was the task organization of each of the company's platoons to different maneuver battalions organic to the 2d BCT. What made the inventories especially challenging was that the platoons



Third Platoon conducts an interrogation.

were located at different combat outposts and forward operating bases (FOBs).

Then the 2d BCT took control of the operational environment held by the 3d Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, nearly doubling the BCT's area of operations (AO). With this expansion, a second company of engineers would be needed to conduct route clearance throughout the gained area. Therefore, the battalion commander requested permission to reconstitute Charlie Company to accomplish the route clearance missions in the newly acquired AO. The 40th, a legacy engineer battalion, by now looked more like a special troops battalion. It had an engineer company assigned, while two others—Alpha and Charlie—were tasked to maneuver units. The battalion had administrative control of Signal Corps and Military Intelligence Corps companies, the required Headquarters and Headquarters Company, and administrative and logistics support of the brigade headquarters company.

Charlie Company was reconstituted at FOB Hammer to start company-level combat operations. In quick succession, the company had change-of-command and relief-in-place/transfer-of-authority ceremonies. Then the leaders turned their attention to retraining sappers who had previously been trained in route clearance but had performed other duties during the deployment thus far. The training plan included a “right-seat, left-seat” ride with the battalion's Bravo Company. It was determined that the retraining would take place before conducting the change-of-command inventories.

The focus of the training plan was to ensure that the noncommissioned officers (NCOs) were directly responsible for all training in their platoons. Three of the four platoon sergeants were explosive ordnance clearance agent (EOCA)-qualified and a select few squad leaders had attended one of the two available Route Reconnaissance and Clearance Courses. Responsibility for the training rested squarely on the shoulders of these leaders, who would perform the missions with the Soldiers.

The Soldiers needed to reinforce the basics of their route clearance skills and the fundamentally sound practices they had used throughout previous deployments. Theater-level Iron Claw Academy route clearance training¹ was offered to the company, but the leaders opted to trust the company's NCOs to pass along the training they had already received to bring the company together with a common mission. The plan worked, and within a few short missions the Soldiers were recording finds and reducing explosive hazards on the routes they patrolled, greatly reducing the risk to U.S. and coalition forces.

Route clearance operations and refresher training became the top priorities as Charlie Company continued its transition with Bravo Company, hindering the change-of-command inventory schedule. Training was scheduled to allow each platoon a day to refit, permitting time to conduct inventories and prepare for the next day's mission. This illustrated the old maxim that the mission comes first. The company's supply team members were recognized by the commander of Multinational Division–Center for their



Second Platoon's TALON robot (center) returns after emplacing C-4 on a positive find.



Charlie Company Soldiers follow as their Iraqi partners take the lead on a route clearance patrol.

efforts to ensure that inventories ran as smoothly as possible.

As the company reorganized for its new mission, a need developed for route clearance in the AO of 4th Battalion, 27th Field Artillery. This required a movement of forces from FOB Hammer to Camp Stryker. The need for a platoon to begin route clearance operations was a major forcing factor in moving the command post, additional engineer equipment, and containers. For the second time in the deployment, the company began decentralized operations in support of the BCT. The size of the company and the flexibility of each of its platoons ensured a seamless transition into the unit's new AO. The company was able to conduct route clearance operations independently within days of arriving, well before the rest of the BCT was established in its new home at Camp Stryker.

The entire company moved to Camp Stryker from FOB Hammer within 10 days, and the relief in place began before the company was fully reestablished. Due to the extensive equipment drawn during the relief in place—and throughout the remainder of the deployment—Charlie Company had a complement of more than 70 vehicles. Soon the unit assumed responsibility for the famed Route Tampa, a main supply route (MSR) for U.S. and coalition forces in Iraq. Although Charlie Company only “owned” a relatively small section of Route Tampa, the company took complete control of it. It also became the only route clearance company in-theater to clear Route Tampa and also have partnerships with the Iraqi Army and Iraqi Police. In addition to its route clearance missions along MSR Tampa, Charlie Company also was responsible for conducting route clearance for two more units, effectively doubling its mission load and operational tempo.

As a postscript to this multifaceted transition, Charlie Company maintained a partnership with Iraqi forces

throughout the deployment, cleared Route Tampa several days a week, and cleared routes on the interior of its own brigade's footprint. At tour's end, the company had participated in five named operations, cleared more than 30,000 kilometers, and interrogated 335 explosive hazards. Those numbers read well for an entire tour, but the fact is that Charlie Company accumulated those numbers in just seven months and did it without fatalities.

In conclusion, the first quarter of fiscal year 2009 proved to many in the 2d BCT that the unsung efforts of just over one hundred sappers could accomplish Herculean feats. The facts are simple; in less than 30 days, the Soldiers went from a daily operational role with one set of missions to a daily operational role with a completely different mission set. The transition took place under fire during a change in leadership, with all the inventory requirements that such a change entails. At a time when leaders liken changing the Army's structure to steering an aircraft carrier and compare its efforts to a marathon rather than a sprint, a few dedicated engineers exemplified just the opposite. Those efforts proved vital and timely.



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Endnotes

¹Captain Scott F. Swilley, “Iron Claw Academy: Developing Route Clearance Capabilities in the Iraqi National Police,” *Engineer Professional Bulletin*, Volume 38, July–December 2008, pp. 56–58.